

# Labour Party (Britain): No backsliding on Palestinian rights

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## **Labour's National Policy Forum is trying to weaken an already inadequate party policy on Palestine explains Ariel Pardess.**

Jeremy Corbyn led the Labour Party into the May general election with a clear manifesto commitment to support Palestinian rights. But a document presented to conference would significantly weaken this.

The manifesto stated: *Labour is committed to a comprehensive peace in the Middle East based on a two-state solution – a secure Israel alongside a secure and viable state of Palestine. There can be no military solution to this conflict and all sides must avoid taking action that would make peace harder to achieve. That means both an end to the blockade, occupation and settlements, and an end to rocket and terror attacks. Labour will continue to press for an immediate return to meaningful negotiations leading to a diplomatic resolution. A Labour government will immediately recognise the state of Palestine.*

This position was largely repeated by Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry in a parliamentary debate on the Middle East in July. Thornberry's speech was acclaimed at the time as the best front-bench statement on Palestine for many years, although it was in fact inadequate on several fronts.

But now, even this even-handed approach is being challenged by the statement submitted to conference by Labour's National Policy Forum, which simply states "*In Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Labour is committed to a comprehensive peace based on a two-state solution: a secure Israel alongside a secure and viable state of Palestine*". Gone is the call for an end to the occupation, to the siege of Gaza and to Israeli settlements. Gone is the opposition to a "military solution". Gone is the call for "meaningful negotiations". And crucially, gone is the commitment to an immediate recognition of a Palestinian state.

So it is hardly surprising that the NPF document has been welcomed by Israel's apologists. An article in the *Jewish Chronicle* [[1](#)] quotes a "senior Jewish Labour source" as saying that the NPF document is "better than the election manifesto and a bit of a success... The draft text seems to mark the return of what can be described as the classic Labour Zionist position". The source goes on to say that the document contains "a commitment to a 'secure' Israel, which is crucial", apparently not noticing that the manifesto also includes that same wording.

### **Support reference back**

It is important that conference rejects this policy retreat. A constitutional change last year permits conference to refer back a section of the NPF report without rejecting the whole document, and all delegates are urged to vote against this section.

Jenny Manson, chair of the newly-formed Jewish Voice for Labour, notes that “Most party members, including many Jewish ones, will be alarmed at this apparent surrender of the party’s principles. They have not been consulted about it and we believe they will support our call for this section of the NPF report to be remitted.” [2]

However, while opposing this retrograde step, we must recognise the ways in which the Manifesto statements, and Thornberry’s speech, were inadequate. The fact that these were nevertheless a great advance on previous positions is a stark indication of how much work we still have to do in order to challenge the current consensus view on the Middle East.

### **More to fight for**

In the first place, the existing policy, as expressed in the manifesto and by Thornberry, draws an equal sign between Israel’s oppressive policies and Palestinian resistance, and places similar demands on both sides in this asymmetric conflict. If this even-handedness is intended to placate Israel and its supporters, it is clearly not working; if it is a genuine analysis, then this is naive in the extreme.

The existing position is based on support for a non-existent “peace process”. Since the 1993 Oslo Agreement, if not earlier, Israel’s preferred strategy has been to engage the Palestinian leadership in an interminable wrangle about minor details, while steadily continuing its expropriation and settlement of Palestinian land.

In the quarter-century since the Agreement was signed, the number of Israeli settlers in areas occupied in 1967 has grown from about 280,000 to more than 750,000, controlling some 42% of the land in the West Bank. The Labour Manifesto at least called for “an immediate return to meaningful negotiations”; the NPF document drops even this lip service to any peace process.

The manifesto, and Thornberry’s speech, called for an end to settlement building, but made no reference to the status and future of the current illegal settlements. But any attempt to promote a “two-state solution” which does not include a demand for the dismantlement of all Israeli settlements and the return of settlers to the Israeli state is doomed to irrelevance. The manifesto and Thornberry fudge this issue; the NPF simply closes its eyes to Israel’s expansion of settlements.

While it would be unrealistic to expect Labour to express support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions call, it is regrettable that neither the manifesto nor Thornberry promised that a Labour government would stop arms sales to Israel. Nor do they undertake to enforce EU rulings about the labelling of exports from the illegal Israeli settlements.

### **Right of return**

But the glaring omission in existing policy, as expressed in the manifesto and by Thornberry, is any recognition of the need to act on the right of return for Palestinian refugees. As recently as 2015, Jeremy Corbyn recognised and openly supported this [3]; since his election as leader, he does not seem to have made any statement at all. Despite his current reticence, it is clear that Corbyn recognises that there can be no lasting settlement to the conflict, and no peace for Palestinians and Israelis that does not provide a resolution of this lasting injustice.

Our task must be to campaign for Palestinian return, and for the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel, as necessary elements of any Labour government approach to resolving this conflict. At the same time, we must resolutely oppose any attempts, such as those in the NPF document, to further weaken the tentative Labour steps away from a pro-Israel agenda.

**Ariel Pardess**

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\* September 15, 2017:

<http://socialistresistance.org/no-backsliding-on-palestinian-rights/10727>

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**Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/success-as-labour-plans-to-drop-hostility-to-israel-1.443343>

[2] <http://europalforum.org.uk/en/post/2933>

[3] <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/listen-palestinians-deserve-right-return-says-british-mp-jeremy-corbyn>